

DRIVEN BY A MUTUAL LANGUAGE? BRITISH VERSUS AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract: The development of the English language is regarded as a continuous process in which its daily usage plays an essential role. The historical events are also considered a contributing factor since their impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people inevitably includes the language used by each speaker. With the geographical expansion and the colonization of different parts of the world, local language varieties have been superseded, and the English language spectrum has widened significantly. Our study focuses on the differences between American English and British English, as there are approximately 4,000 words that make up their core lexical identity.

Keywords: differences, variation, spelling, vocabulary, British English, American English.

1. Introduction

Like every language across the world, English has been shaped not only by the events that changed different aspects in its daily usage, but also by its speakers who have contributed to this constant evolution. The continuous process of development cannot be stopped, as speakers use language in their own way, depending on the context, the level of literacy, the range of vocabulary, the people they address to, the circumstances, the purpose of communication and many other factors. Having in mind these elements and many more, individuals will state the same ideas in various dialects and registers, also enacting different styles. They will choose the way the words are pronounced, they will pay attention to the lexical resources employed and even to different grammatical structures. Consequently, the distinctions generated between two or more speakers of the same language will also count as linguistic variations.

With an estimated number of 4,000 words with different meaning or use in comparison with British English, American English evolved and started to differ considerably from British English in terms of accent, pronunciation, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and also in syntax. At a deeper level, changes in tempo and intonation became distinctive, as well as in the way the words were placed in an utterance, up to the omission or addition of some words in the sentence. A very significant change that emerged was in the enormous cultural differences starting with everyday basic words and reaching different institutions and forms of government.

2. The evolution of American English and the process of uniformization

The historical events that marked the formation and the evolution of the United States of America reverberated in the development of American English, a well-known variety of the English language. Thus, an effective approach to the evolution of American English

should include the major landmarks of the American history as these are turning points that undoubtedly shaped the language and also contributed to the process of uniformization.

The English colonization of the Americas began relatively late compared to the Spanish colonization of Central and South America - the first permanent English colony that was settled in America, on the mainland, was at Jamestown in 1607, followed by twelve other colonies. The Plymouth colony established in 1620 was based on religious and commercial reasons and, fourteen years later, the English founded the Maryland colony.

Generally, people came to America to find freedom from considerations such as religious, economic and political oppression. But most of the newcomers wanted to escape religious persecution as in the case of Mayflower colonists, the so-called Pilgrims who settled in Plymouth, and the Puritans that established the Massachusetts Bay Company, which was regarded for a long period of time as a leading political and economic power of the colony. As the number of people who continued to come to America was continuously growing, certain institutions were required for the society to function properly. Consequently, the legalization of some institutions, the existence of a number of laws and regulations were introduced for an appropriate operation of these new political, economic and even social institutions. (Biber, Conrad, 2001: 135)

The newcomers were speaking the language of Shakespeare and Milton, the English language that was spoken in England at that time. But the settlers did not come only from a certain region, they came from various parts of Britain and they brought with them the language they spoke. Their language was not a relocation of the same dialect, it was, in fact, an amalgam of different features of the English language spoken in a colony. However, the result of this mixture of dialects was the survival of some features and the levelling of other features which led to a more uniform form of speech in America than in England. (Maguire, McMahon, 2011: 47)

The Atlantic might be considered a hurdle that interrupted the connection between the language spoken in America and the language used by the native speakers in Britain which deepened the process of divergence. The development that the British English experienced on the continent reached American colonies with difficulty and the people living in America were forced to adapt the old uses of the language to new modern demands. Faced with the rapid development of society, the language had to fill in the gaps with different borrowings from the languages of other groups who were living in the colonies such as the Amerindians, the Dutch and the French. (Algeo, 2005: 184)

Originally coming from all parts of the British Isles, the newcomers that settled in a specific area started to move to different parts of America according to their needs and opportunities. Some of the colonists moved from Massachusetts to north in Maine and New Hampshire, others migrated from New England to New York and New Jersey, or another group from Dorchester Massachusetts later known as Dorchester Society moved to Georgia which created a very homogeneous European population nowhere to be found in Europe to this extent. Linguistically, the population that spread all over the continent contributed significantly to the uniformization process of the English language. One of the most important figures that played a valuable part in what is called *linguistic nationalism* is Noah Webster, the American lexicographer who also authored the concept of *Federal English* and opened the way for other linguists to continue to study the

language developed in America. Webster is equally regarded as the initiator of some of the most important changes in American spelling. His most valuable contribution to standard American English is his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) where spelling and word usage are the key elements of standardization. Another important contributor to the process of standardization was the grammarian and the Quaker Lindley Murray whose work became a reference point in the study of grammar, especially for school children across America, thus the standardization of grammar supported the linguistic nationalism. (Schur, 2007: 85)

The uniqueness of American variety is the result of a series of events that contributed to the development of the nation we know today. The association of these events with their reflection in everyday speech is one way of understanding the differences that become apparent in the language spoken in America today.

3. Differences in spelling

Although Noah Webster's intentions in creating a different spelling system did not materialize and the differences between British and American English may seem unnoticeable for ordinary speakers, they represent a very important source of research for linguists. Most of these differences are generally attributed to Webster, even if his initial plan led only to a small number of changes. Nevertheless, one of his greatest achievements was undoubtedly the publication of the famous *American Dictionary of the English Language*. From its first edition in 1828, his dictionary was considered the standard of American English.

Regarded as one of the most familiar differences in spelling, the British ending *-our* simplified in the American English in *-or* as we can observe in words such as *favour/favor*, *harbour/harbor* and *labour/labor*. The root of this change is based on Samuel Johnson's theory of etymology. Another well-known difference is between the British ending *-re* and the American counterpart *-er* as present in words such as *centre/center*, *metre/meter* or *theatre/theater*. Additionally, the variation *-ise* used mainly in British English and *-ize* used by the American speakers is also one of the most familiar ones in words such as *criticise/criticize*, *equalise/equalize* or *organise/organize*. Although considered rare, the difference between the British *-que* and the American *-k* or *-ck* is also essential. Words like *cheque* or *banque* still bear the British spelling as the Americans prefer the simpler version *check* and *bank*. (Baker, 2017: 37)

Although the spelling of words such as *tyre* can be considered a spelling mistake by an American speaker instead of *tire*, it is, in fact, the variation of *-y* and *-i*. The more conservative British people still preserve the *-y*, in spelling. The pairs of words *gipsy – gipsy*, *gayety – gaiety* and *syphon – siphon* embody the difference in spelling. The American tendency to simplify the spelling system can be observed in the oscillation of *-ph* in British English and *-f* in American English. This can be exemplified with terms connected to chemistry and their compounds such as *sulphur – sulfur*, *sulphate – sulfate*, *sulphide – sulfide*. (Janicki, 1977: 52)

The terms that use the ending in *-able* share a different feature in British English in comparison with American English. The words ending in *-e* keep the final *-e* and add the ending *-able* for the British spelling. However, this rule does not apply to the American spelling system, because the final *-e* is dropped when adding *-able*. The word *likeable* is

spelt with -e in British English while the American English lacks the -e, specifically *likable*. The situation is similar for the following words: the British spelling of *blameable*, *loveable*, and *sizeable*, while the American spelling of these words is *blamable*, *lovable*, and *sizable*. (Modiano, 2000: 108) As Modiano notices there is another situation when the vowel e is dropped. Words like *judgement* and *ageing* are specific to British spelling while the American spelling drops the e, such as *judgment* and *aging*.

Additionally, there are some categories of words that do not fit in any of the above framework, because their differences are mainly irregular. This type of words includes pairs such as *axe* with the American spelling *ax*, *aluminium* and the American *aluminum*, *cosy* with its American version *cozy*, the British *draught* and the American *draft*, *jewellery* with changes in American spelling *jewelry*, *pyjamas* spelt *pajamas* in American English, *plough* and the simpler version of American English *plow* and the case of *reflexion* which is typically British, with the American version *reflection*. (Janicki, 1977: 53)

A very important feature, when we refer to spelling, is the origin of some words. Latin and Greek origin words preserved their initial spelling in British English, but the American spelling reform influenced this category of words which led to a simplification in spelling. The original spelling contained the *ae* or *oe* letters, while the Americans reduced them to -e. The medical terms *anaemia*, *anaesthesia*, *foetus*, *gynaecology* and *oestrogen* are examples of British spelling whereas the Americans spell them in a simpler manner like *anemia*, *anesthesia*, *fetus*, *gynecology* and *estrogen*.

4. Differences in vocabulary

The changes in pronunciation, stress, intonation and spelling did not mark the discrepancies between British and American English in the way that changes in vocabulary created a significant unicity of American English compared to British English. The main differences to the vast corpora of British and American English are basically the result of the environmental differences that both varieties were exposed to across time. As the colonists were separated from Britain by the ocean which functioned as a linguistic barrier, they were forced either to borrow words or to coin terms and expressions to name the new objects. The discrepancies in vocabulary continued to appear and to differentiate from the continental English until 1925 when some of these newly coined words entered the standard British English. This happened under the influence of the rapidly developing mass-media (both radio and television) and, later, to the quick and wide extension of the internet. (Janicki, 1977: 56)

The British term *accelerator* has as its American correspondent *gas pedal*, both terms used when you want to speed a car or a lorry. The British word *accommodation* can also be found in American English, mostly in the spoken version and rarely used in the written form, but with -s at the end. The most common form in American English is *room and board*. The British *accumulator* might be interpreted in a confusing manner as the place where liquids are stored, while the American equivalent is *battery*, a term perfectly understood by British people. From the vocabulary connected to flying, the British word *air hostess* is known as *stewardess* to American people. Although it is highly

probable for the Americans not to understand the British word *anticlockwise*, they will certainly use the word *counterclockwise*. (Davies, 2005: 138-9, Baker, 2017: 33)

Not only can the British term *baby-minder* sound extremely strange to an American speaker who is familiar with *baby-sitter*, but it may also impede communication between British and American speakers. The situation shifts in the case of the British term *baby tooth* which is internationally recognised, whereas the American *milk tooth* may cause difficulty in understanding. Although apparently very clear, confusion can arise between the British *biscuit* and the American *cookie*, as both terms are used to indicate a small pastry which is round and little. The British term *bonnet* that denotes the lid over the engine of a car will never be used by Americans, as they associate this term with an old-fashioned hat worn only by women and prefer to use *hood* for that part of a car. (Maur, 2012: 12, Baker, 2017: 32)

The famous British cultural symbol - *call box* or *telephone box* would certainly not be used by the American speakers as they have *phone booth* or *telephone booth*. The Americans have difficulty in associating the British word *coach* with the American *bus*, as for them *coach* is associated with the person training athletes. In British English there is also a difference in meaning as the word *bus* is used especially for local transportation and, for longer distances, they use *coach* as it is considered more comfortable. *Coach station* is used in British English and *bus station* in American English. (Janicki, 1977: 59-61, Modiano, 2000: 34-41)

Although the British expression *dialling code* is losing terrain in Britain, it can cause confusion in America. They use *area code* and its tendency is to become international. The British terms *dustbin*, *dustcart* or *dustman* can cause serious difficulty to an ordinary American speaker because for them *dust* is not a synonym of *trash*. In their case, the meaning of *dust* refers only to the small pieces found in corners when cleaning. (Janicki, 1977: 59-61, Modiano, 2000: 41-44)

The British *exclamation mark* can also create ambiguity to the American speakers because they use *exclamation point*. The British term *ex-directory* is unknown to some American speakers, while the American term *unlisted* can be easily deduced from the context by British speakers. When speaking about cars, the British use the terms *exhaust pipe* while the Americans use *tail pipe*. (Modiano, 2000: 44-45, Maur, 2012: 83)

Among these linguistic and cultural variations, perhaps the most prominent is that between the British *Father Christmas* and the American *Santa Claus*, with no difficulties in understanding either of them. The British *first floor* and the American *second floor* often create confusion. The British speakers use *ground floor* for the floor situated at the same level as the ground outside while the Americans start the numbering of the floors from this floor named *first floor*. The *first floor* for the British people is the equivalent of *second floor* for the Americans. The usage of the British term *full stop* is uncommon for American speakers and can generate incomprehension as they perceive the two words individually. The most common way of saying the mark used at the end of a sentence is *period*. (Janicki, 1977: 62-63, Modiano, 2000: 45-49)

The British term *inflammable* is rarely used by the American speakers because they use the term *flammable*, a term that became familiar to the British people as well. The British term *letter box* is rarely, if ever, used by the Americans as they prefer *mailbox*. The simpler version of the British term *life jacket* is the American *life vest*. The British term *note* used in expressions such as *5 pound note* is easily recognized by the

American speakers because they use *bill* as in the expression *5 dollar bill*. The terms are not interchangeable and the expression *5 dollar note* will never be used. A British term that will not be easily recognized is *pedestrian crossing*. It is very unlikely for the Americans to use it as they are familiar with the more internationally term *crosswalk*. (Modiano, 2000: 63, Davies, 2005: 160-161)

The British term *queue* indicating people waiting in line will definitely create confusion for the American users as they will associate it with *cue* which is pronounced in the same way. They will use as the equivalent of *queue* the term *line* to avoid such ambiguity. When mentioning the academic titles, the British speakers will use the term *Reader* for the academic rank below that of a professor and the Americans will use *Associate Professor* for the same title. The British *Senior Lecturer*, *Assistant Professor* are also used in the United States. The general term *lecturer* is generally used on both sides of the Atlantic. The British name for the wood used in building is *timber*, a word that will not be used across the ocean. The Americans will use the word *lumber* instead. (Modiano, 2000: 70-71, Davies, 2005: 92)

When stating the degree of cooking a stake, the British speakers will use the word *underdone*, a term understood by the American speakers, but not commonly used. They will use *rare* instead. The British term *veranda* will generate confusion across the ocean, as the Americans are familiar with *porch* for the same part of a house. The lights of a car that indicate the driver's intention to change direction are called *winkers* by the British speakers and the Americans will use the word *blinkers* instead. The term used in clothing, for opening and closing with ease is called *zip* in British English and *zipper* in American English, both terms being equally understood.

5. Differences in grammar

The grammatical approach is rather complex as there are many constructions that are valid for one variety of English and considered inappropriate or incorrect for other varieties. In any of these situations, the variations do not interfere in the process of communication, so the message will be transmitted straightforward without any barriers in perceiving the intended message.

One of the most recognizable structural differences between British and American English regarding the verb is the formation of the *past tense for irregular verbs*. For this feature, the past simple has a *-t* inflection in British English, while the general tendency for the American English is to adopt the standardized *-ed* form for these verbs. The difference between these two forms can pass unnoticed in pronunciation by both native speakers of English and second language speakers as well. Consequently, the difference between the inflection *-t* and the standard *-ed* will be perceptible mainly in the written form. In this category we have verbs such as *learned/learnt* or *spelt/spelled*. (Modiano, 2000: 126)

The situation is more complex when we refer to the verb *get* as the British speakers will favour the classical form *got*, while for the Americans the form *gotten* will be used for past participle. The American version form will sound peculiar to the British people and

it will not only seem old-fashioned, but also considered as being incorrect. (Rohdenburg and Schluter, 2009: 20)

One of the most well-known differences in grammar between British and American English concerns the use of *present perfect*. While an English speaker will say *Have you already read this book?*, an American speaker will prefer to use the past simple such as *Did you read this book already?* This American change of using past simple instead of present perfect simple was regarded by scholars as a feature specific only to the United States. Recently this variety has reached the use of everyday English for the British speakers and it is becoming more common in Britain as well. (Peters, 2004: 193)

The most eligible variations between the speakers on both sides of the Atlantic is the position of *adverbs*. The adverbs can be placed in mid-position, a situation that is extremely common to British English with adverbs such as *always, certainly, definitely, never, often, sometimes*, etc., in initial position which is the most widely used and in the final position of the main clause. The temporal adverbials in mid-position are normally situated after the auxiliary verbs. A British speaker will utter *She has probably won the lottery.* and an American user will most likely say *She probably has won the lottery.* (Algeo, 2006: 133)

The use of *prepositions* both in British English and American English depends basically on the adverbial expressions used. The distribution of prepositions does not occur according to some specific rules and the variations of English have generated the use of some prepositions in certain contexts or with different parts of speech. A proper example will be *I live in Bond Street.* as it is common for the British speakers and *I live on Bond Street.* a typical usage for the American speakers. Another characteristic illustration of the usage of prepositions is *I usually work at the weekend.* which is the normal British usage, whereas the Americans prefer *I usually work on the weekend.* The British speakers will use the preposition *at* in the expression *at the end of the week.* (Biber, Conrad, Leech, 2002 :87-9)

There is an important number of differences between British and American English when we refer to *subject-verb agreement*. The core of this matter is generally encountered when we deal with nouns related to businesses, official agencies, organizations, teams, etc. and nouns which are commonly called *collective nouns*, which, in British English, are treated as plural, while the American speakers will always refer to them as singular nouns. Consequently, the British speakers will use *are* for a proper subject-verb agreement and the Americans will use *is*. The British users will state *The government are discussing...* while the Americans will say *The government is discussing ...* (Modiano, 2000: 128, Darragh, 2000: 20)

6. Conclusion

All the aforementioned differences have led us to the conclusion that, in spite of the number of variations, despite the level on which they occur (pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar), they do not generally impede the communication process between British and American speakers. Although the discrepancies at the vocabulary level may create incomprehension, most of the lexical units might be recognized by contextualization work. As a result, the global message can be transmitted from one speaker to another, even though not all the terms might be recognized with ease, i.e.,

there is a high degree of mutual intelligibility between the two widespread variations of the English language.

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